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ABSTRACT

The struggle and achievements of Black women in American society are described, emphasizing the distance that Black women still have to go to achieve equality. It is argued that education is the most consistent and obtainable means for the empowerment of Black women. The education that is advocated is one in which the conditions of Black women are acknowledged and analyzed, as well as the realities of other peoples, times and places. It is felt that the empowerment of Black women requires the kind of education where the goal is more than the advancement of an individual; it is an education that moves toward changing the conditions of our communities, people, nation and world. The curriculum of such an education must fully address the complexities of Black women's lives. Black women should be educated for leadership, with an emphasis on leadership as service to others. (KM)

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ASSOCIATION OF BLACK WOMEN IN HIGHER EDUCATION, INC.

Tenth Anniversary Conference
Banquet Address

May 6, 1988

THE EDUCATION AND ENDOWMENT OF BLACK WOMEN

By JOHNNETTA B. COLE

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THE ASSOCIATION

The Association of Black Women in Higher Education (ABWHE) is a national membership organization whose mission is:

1. to promote the intellectual growth and educational development of Black women in higher education.

2. to seek to eliminate racism, sexism, classism and other social barriers which hinder Black women in higher education from achieving their human potential,

3. to communicate the history, personal and professional achievements and contributions of Black women in higher education in order to help preserve the presence of Blacks in higher education,

4. to provide academic and social mentoring for Black youth in order to insure a future generation of Blacks in higher education, and

5. to utilize our talents, strengths and expertise to advance a vision of social justice.

Association of Black Women in Higher Education, Inc.
30 Limerick Drive
Albany, New York 12204

"The true worth of a race must be measured by the character of its womanhood." These were Mary McLeod Bethune's words, spoken in 1933.

"To know the condition of a people, it is only necessary to know the condition of their women." With these words, Martin R. Delaney, the great 19th Century Black Nationalist, captured an important reality: studying the conditions of Black women involves looking into gigantic mirrors which reflect all of our lives. To know the conditions of Black women is to know all of the intertwined ways in which race and gender, culture and age, sexuality, religion and politics are played out in our society. In short, the status of Afro-American women must be of interest to us all. But it is Black women and not some monolithic myth called *The Black Woman* that requires our attention, our understanding, and our commitment to positive change. Who are Black women? We are the 18 to 21 year olds at Spelman college. Although these young women know the pain of racism and sexism, they also know the taste of success. These Black women are members of a class with the highest combined SAT score of any freshman class at an historically Black college. Some of these Black women are among the 37 percent of our students who major in the division of natural sciences. And, they will leave Spelman to pursue more studies and graduate training in law, medicine, engineering, political science and music. These Black women will not earn as much as Black men, white women or white men, but they will earn far more than most of their sisters of color. Racism and sexism will keep these Black women from sitting on the top of the world, but on the other hand, they will not land on the bottom of the heap.

But there are other Black women!

There are other Black women—like the Black women who are old and in the painful conditions which result from years of poverty. These are women whose race, and gender and class were taken as reason enough for them to have the worst of health care, if any at all; the most druggery-filled jobs, when any were to be had, and only the most basic of schooling, if that.

A longer version of this talk was presented at Hunter College on April 19, 1988.

What do we understand from these two images of Black women? We understand that among Black women, no less than among all women, there are serious differences just as there are striking commonalities. In short, if you have seen one Black woman, you have not seen us all.

Given the complexities and the varieties in Black women's lives, how might we characterize the state of Black womanhood and thus what do we learn of Black people today? Clearly, there have been substantial changes in the lives of Black women since certain men of Europe came to America seeking their wealth off of the backs of African men and women. We know from the historical record that slavery was a time of full employment for all Black folks. Under that barbaric system of equal opportunity employment, Black women bore the excruciating pain of being unpaid slave driven labor, no less than Black men; and Black women bore the lash as well. Because they were the carriers of the next generation of the "masters" profit, to protect the unborn slave child, a pregnant Black woman was made to put her extended belly into a deep hole so that the warm earth hugged her baby while her back received the cold cruelty of the whip. And, when the brutality of racism and capitalism had dealt its blow to Black women by day; the night time brought the most bitter sting of sexism in the form of rape by "the master."

Despite the fact that Black women worked as slaves just as Black men did, the ideology of female subordination meant that at sundown, they began yet another shift: the burdens of household tasks in the slave cabin and the rearing of their slave children fell on Black women.

We have come a long way from slavery. And yet, we must acknowledge that Afro-American women have a very long way to go to reach a new era, to arrive at a different kind of world where racial, gender and economic inequality are no more.

Today, in 1988, there is only one Black woman in Congress: we have a long way to go!

In the latest issue of *Black Enterprise* where the nations top Black CEO's are listed, there is not a woman among them: we have a long way to go!

There are approximately 3,000 colleges and universities in the U.S. Approximately 300 of those have female presidents. Of the 300, 22 are Black women. We have a long way to go!

The number of female headed households continues to grow among Black families. 41.5 percent or more than 2 out of every 5 Afro-American families are headed by women. Let it be known that the problem with such households is not that a woman is in charge. The problem is that they are poor households. We have a long way to go!

The rate of teenage pregnancy among Black youth is of truly frightening proportions. Today, almost 10 percent of Black girls between the ages of 15 and 18 have had a baby. More than a fourth of these very young females are having a second child. We truly have a long way to go!

When the average yearly earnings of Black and white men and women are compared, despite the rumor that Black women are profiting from their positions as "two-fors", the truth is that Black women are still on the bottom of the pay scale. And, we have a long way to go to reach pay equity!

Because of poverty and discrimination, Black women are still twice as likely as white women to die in childbirth. We do, indeed, have a long way to go!

Now, we must ask the obvious. If we have such a long way to go, how do we get there?

There are those who respond by saying that nothing short of a revolution in our nation will end the poverty, racism and sexism under which Black women suffer.

There are others who would challenge the picture I have drawn of the status of Black women and offer instead the promise that more pulling of boot straps will soon have the problem licked for Black women, no less than Black men.

I want to present yet another case. I want to present the case for education as the most consistent and obtainable means for the empowerment of Black women. And, when the least among us is empowered—"great God Almighty, we will all be free at last!" But before my call for education as a route to empowerment seems straight forward and, indeed, easy, I had best say what I mean by education.

The empowerment of Black women requires an education in which our own conditions are acknowledged and analyzed, no less than the realities of other peoples, times and places.

The empowerment of Black women requires the kind of education where the goal is more than the advancement of an individual. It must be an education that moves toward changing the conditions of our communities, indeed, our people and our nation. Even more: our world.

To Know Ourselves is to Empower Ourselves

In the year 1988, we must still call for a process of education which acknowledges the conditions of Black women! As recently as a couple of weeks ago, Mr. Bennett, Secretary of Education was ranting and raving over Stanford University's decision to replace a Eurocentric and male-centered course with one that draws on works by women and people of color. Why is it that from the kindergarten through the professional schools, the majority of Black women are not taught about the history and culture of Black people, and the particular realities of Black women's lives? And as long as it is so, the status of Black women will remain as it is. A people without a knowledge of who they are cannot successfully participate in determining the direction in which they wish to go.

There is great power in teaching young Black girls about Abraham Lincoln but never about Ida B. Wells. There is great power in that act of mis-education, for the silence about Black women as activists suggests that we always have been, are now, and must always be no more than the recipients of what is done to us or for us.

One senses the tremendous potential of Black women's studies when one confronts the great resistance to it in our public schools, our colleges, and our universities. When I say Black women's studies, I mean, of course, that stage beyond *hard* fought for Black studies and *hard* to get women studies. For as I asked years ago: where are the women in Black studies? And, where are the Blacks in women's studies.

A curriculum that genuinely incorporated the complexities of Black women's lives would empower—to use a DuBoisian phrase—the females of the darker race. We would be empowered because we would have learned the source of our powerlessness. And now imagine what would happen if she who learns, teaches!

A curriculum that fully addresses Black women's studies must explore the lives of Black women in an international context. Nanny of Jamaica must become as familiar to us as Sojourner Truth. The struggles of sisters in Port-au-Prince, Johannesburg, San Juan, and the West Indian section of London must be as clear to us as our hold on the various conditions of Black women in Manhattan, Atlanta, Topeka, and Los Angeles.

Black women's studies as a part of the process of education in our country would teach Black women as indeed it would teach all of us that the reason there are only a hand full of Black women physicists is not because Black people are dumb and women can't do math!

Again—an education (not a schooling, and not a *colleging* as Langston Hughes put it) an education about ourselves would empower Black women because it would help us understand the source of our powerlessness. And, understanding is always the first step toward change.

We must change the condition of all of us to truly affect the condition of one of us.

We can very seriously ask: What is the purpose of education for Black women? Indeed, what is the purpose of education for all of us? There are those who would argue that a Black woman should be educated in order to prepare her to be a leader. And when asked what leadership means, the response is that it means gaining personal political power and economic wealth.

There are others of us who say that indeed Black women should be educated for leadership, but leadership is, at its very core, service to others.

Harriett Tubman wasn't a leader because she struggled and fought for her own freedom. Harriett Tubman was a leader because she risked her own freedom a million times so that others could gain theirs.

Mary McLeod Bethune wasn't a leader because she sacrificed and struggled for her own education. Mary McLeod Bethune was a leader because she dreamed and planned and worked for the education of others.

Marian Wright Edelman isn't a Spelman alumna who is a leader because she cares about and works in defense of her own children. Although to do so is to be human. Marian Wright Edelman is a leader because she fights for the rights of all children.

Winnie Mandela isn't a leader because she confronts and challenges apartheid in the interest of her own dignity. Winnie Mandela isn't a leader because she speaks for the freedom of Nelson Mandela. Winnie Mandela is a leader because her efforts, her work, her organizing is for the basic human rights of an entire people.

I deeply fear what happens when we have a group of people who have been "educated" to know so much, but do so little. Think about our country where we know how to send people to the moon, but seem not to care that millions of Americans *must* see that moon every night, as they sleep in the full discomfort of their homelessness. We are a society that knows how to run almost everything by a machine. But we seem to have lost our

intelligence, when it comes to figuring out how to stop some folks from discriminating against other folks. We have developed every conveivable weapon for war with the possibility of nuclear annihilation. But a guarantee of peace with justice continues to escape us.

There are polls which suggest that we may be coming out of the period of me, me, meism; a period where students want to do everything for themselves, but nothing for others. Let us hope that we are indeed returning to a sense of leadership as service. Imagine what it would be like if every Black woman received an education which led her to dream about her future, but that dream would include more than a closet full of fine clothes and a garage filled with a fancy car—or two. She would dream of the joy of spending Saturday afternoons at a "Y" tutoring little brothers and sisters?

Imagine an education in which a Black woman who became a $60,000 a year professional, figured out how much of her time and resources she might be able to direct to projects, organizations, and causes which address those who will not see $60,000 in their lifetime?

Martin Luther King once said:

> *Like every man, every woman must decide whether she will walk in the light of creative altruism or the darkness of destructive selfishness. This is the judgment. Life's most persistent and urgent question is, what are you doing for others?*

When we create an educational system which prepares Black women—indeed, all men and women, to respond positively to that question—we will have arrived at that place where education is, indeed, empowering.

The time has come to bring closure on this talk on the education and empowerment of Black women. I have said a few words about three imperatives for an empowering education for Afro-American women—that is an education which:

- Acknowledges *our* conditions; and an education which
- Contributes to *changing* our conditions.

The most important point to stress in closing is this: the empowerment of Black women is, indeed, a necessity for the empowerment of us all. For as Delaney said: "To know the condition of a people you have but to know the condition of their women." As Mary McLeod Bethune taught us, "The true worth of a race must be measured by the character of its womanhood."

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JOHNNETTA B. COLE

Dr. Johnnetta B. Cole, the first Black woman to head, Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia, comes to the presidency at midpoint in a career that spans significant scholarship and distinguished administration. Most recently, as professor of anthropology at Hunter College and member of the graduate faculty of the City University of New York, she was director of the Latin American and Caribbean Studies Program.

Educated at Fisk University, Oberlin College (BA in Sociology, 1957), and Northwestern University (MA, 1959; Ph.D. in anthropology, 1967), Dr. Cole's scholarship centers on cultural anthropology, Afro-American studies, and women's studies. Broadly published, two of her books—*All American Women: Lines That Divide, Ties that the Bind* (1986), and *Anthropology for the Eighties: Introductory Readings* (1982),—are seminal collections used in college classrooms across the country. Her newest book, *Anthropology for the Nineties*, was published in 1988.

Widely recognized as a leader, Dr. Cole is president of the International Women's Anthropology Conference, past president of the Association of Black Anthropologists, and a member of the Africa Round Table of the Phelps Stokes Fund. She is a member of the Women's Foreign Policy Council, an advisory and contributing editor for *The Black Scholar*, and on the editoral board of *Anthropology and Humanism Quarterly*. She has been included in *Who's Who in Black America*and *Who's Who of American Women*.

Dr. Cole is the mother of three sons and the sisterly role model of thousands of students.